

EVOLUTION OF THE SETTLEMENT IN MAYĀDĪN (SYRIA)

MARIE-ODILE ROUSSET
INSTITUT FRANÇAIS D'ÉTUDES ARABES DE DAMAS

The site of Raḥba-Mayādīn was excavated from 1976 to 1980, during six seasons, by a French-Syrian team supervised by Kassem Toueir, of the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums of Syria, and Thierry Bianquis, who at that time was head of the French Institute for Arabic Studies in Damascus, and currently is professor at the Lyon II University.

The modern town of Mayādīn is located in the flood plain of the Euphrates, on the right bank of the river, 40 km south of Deir ez-Zor. In this region, the flood plain, a few kilometers wide, is incised around 40 m into the steppe plateau. Up from Mayādīn, a meandre is less than one kilometer from the plateau. This fact can explain why people chose this place for the two sites, one of which overlooks the plain and the other commands the crossing of the river.

The aim of the excavations was to discover the location of the Abbasid town of Raḥba Mayādīn. According to the texts, this town, called Raḥba Mālik ibn Ṭawq was founded under the caliphate of al-Mā'mūn (813-833) on virgin soil. Its fortification wall was reconstructed by Abū Taglib in 968-969, the town was later abandoned after the 1156 earthquake. We know too, that during the Abbasid period, the town was attacked by ships, suggesting a close location to the river.

The texts mention that the site was replaced by another one built one *parasang* away, below the steppe plateau. This second town was easily identified on the site, 4 km west from the town of Mayādīn, up from the limit of the cultivated fields, lying under the surviving citadel, on a natural hill, which overlooks both the plain and the steppe (Bianquis 1993; Honigmann - Bianquis 1994).

Analysing the excavations carried out on the sites of Raḥba and Mayādīn should provide better knowledge about the importance and the evolution of both towns in the Middle Ages. The former being a port on the Euphrates river and a halting place for caravans (in this area ends the main caravan road coming from Palmyra), and the latter acting, in succession, as the capital city of various short lived bedouin principalities and garrison town at the border of the Mamluk empire, as a protection from Mongol attacks.

The following report is related to the various occupational phases attested by the sondages carried out at the supposed location of the first town of Mayādīn, on an empty site, close to a hill known as "Tell 'Alwa", in the current town near the Euphrates.

I. THE EARLIEST LEVELS (Fig. 1)

These levels were reached in two areas close to one another. The occupational history reveals two phases: In area 1, a level with a fire place and traces of mortar was excavated under the pavement. This brick pavement ([519]-[520], altitude between 189,12 and 188,98) is associated to north-south walls and ending with an alignment of pillars. It runs further south where some of its traces were encountered.

South of this, there is a mud floor ([611]) 0,35 m above the pavement. The overlaying deposit is similar to the one covering the above-described pavement. It is associated with a coarse wall and a round masonry of brick fragments.

In area 2, two fire places were excavated, east (at 188,55) and west (at 188,67) from the north-south wall (founded at an altitude of 188,47), they are supposed to be contemporary with this wall. The structure of this destroyed wall and its west-orientated continuation consists of layers and has a width of two bricks alternating with one central brick bearing one half brick on each side. The bricks were sealed with a hard dark grey mortar different from the one used in the later constructions. Inside the construction is another floor corresponding to the doorstep of the east-west wall (altitude 188,84).

Above this point, a row of bricks is visible in the western berm. This might be a floor ([305] altitude 189,10) but the excavation did not prove its existence, as it was carried out very fast through to the lower levels. A limestone floor was discovered at the same altitude in the eastern area (XIb's. '10').

FINDS FROM THE ABBASID LEVELS

Only three stratified coins dating from the Abbasid period were found, one in a pit dug from the more recent levels, and the two others on the second floor of square Ic (floor [611], altitude 189,36). They were both minted in Sāmarrā', under the reign of Al-Mu'tazz Billah (865-869) (Nègre 1982, 208). The ceramics found on and under the pavement [519]-[520] and the first floor in area 2 are the following:

- a "torpedo" jar, with orange core, sandy temper and bitumen inside,
- a jug with very fine yellow clay, flat base, double carinated body. The middle part is decorated with carved lines,
- cooking pots (*brittle ware*), fine red material, without neck, with oblique rim and round lips inside and rocker-stamp decoration between triangular lughandles,
- glazed bowls in very fine yellow ware and opacified glaze with decoration with cobalt or green spots or brown lustre painting, known as *Sāmarrā' ware*,
- bowl with orange fabric, white slip, painted decoration with black and green spots under transparent glaze,
- bases of pots with thick sandy core, flat, with sides coming to the inside,
- storage jar with pink fabric and few temper, ring base, short body and straight thickened rim. The top of the body decorated with incised wavy lines.

II. ELEVENTH CENTURY LEVEL

These levels were overlain with successive clay layers, which probably result from the accumulation of deposits by the Euphrates river, located very close to the area. According to the material recovered, consisting of coins (among them, a byzantine one dated to 1055) and ceramics, these layers date to the 11th century. Some of the pottery types are:

- splash ware sometimes with spotted decoration,
- ceramics with transparent glaze on painted decoration with red slip on white ground and green spots,
- little pots around 15 cm high with one handle, carinated body, and flat base.

At 'Āna, the same ceramics came from 11th century levels (Northedge et al. 1988, 82-95). In area 1, there are some walls and a floor on the surface of the clay layers, sloping downwards from east to west (average altitude 190,20).

III. AYYUBID SETTLEMENT

During the next period, most of the existing walls were used again. This occupational period is characterized by several phases, the number of which varies in each dwelling unit, as a result of reconstructions.

Phase 1 (fig.2): It seems that houses of medium size were built first, with empty spaces left between them. The organization of house '1', located in the south-eastern corner, with a central yard surrounded with rooms laid higher than the yard did not change during this period. The identical disposition of the bricks in the lower parts of walls [22] and [401] leads to suppose that a similar though smaller building '2' existed at the south-western corner of the excavated area. In the north-eastern corner, house '3' has rooms of the same size as house '1', with a similar organization. Moreover, its orientation is not the same as the main orientation in the last phase of the area. It can thus be attributed to this phase. A wall encountered in square Xc during a sondage carried out beneath the floor of one of its rooms leads to believe in the existence of a construction with a different organization in the previous phase. The buildings of this period are characterized by the use of square bricks 18 x 18 cm cemented with grey mortar.

Phase 2 (fig.3): Houses, such as house '5' located in the middle of the excavated square were progressively built in the empty spaces. House '5' includes a central yard surrounded with three *īwāns* on three of its sides, as well as small corner rooms. It has been limited to the space left between the corners of the previously built houses. House '4' consists of a room, apparently a reception room, as two niches were found in a wall pierced with a door, as well as lateral benches along the walls. The entrance was probably looking out East, facing the door. Other rooms were built around this central room, westwards as far as the [212] wall and northwards.

Phase 3 (fig.4): The houses built in this period generally use square bricks (with sides varying between 19 and 22 cm) and pink mortar. Yet the yards of houses '5' and '6' are paved with bricks 40 cm with bevelled sides. The northern part of house '5' was modified, probably when a new entrance was built, as the toilets were then moved to another location. Moreover, all the floors were laid higher. The floor and some walls of houses '1' and '4' were rebuilt, and those of house '3' were also reconstructed (floor made of pink mortar in this phase). House '6' and the northern alley were constructed, as well as house '7', the latter was built after house '5', which possibly opened to the South at first.

Phase 4 (fig.5): The surface of house '2' was reduced after a door looking out on to the yard was filled. An aisle became independent, creating an additional house, '9', made up of three rooms in a row. House '4' was divided into 2 parts sharing the same entrance hall. Access to the western part of house '3' was suppressed with the building of a masonry. The floor was also done. The floors of house '5' and neighbouring house '4' were repaved, as well as those of some rooms of house '1', using bricks measuring between 23 and 25 cm and cemented with white mortar. During this phase, the excavated area is probably located at the corner of a block of houses, with the southern houses opening on to the south. The street level was higher than that of the yard as a few steps lead down into house '1'. The houses in the north-eastern corner of the area were probably served by another street, oriented north-south. As a matter of fact, house '3' was accessed by a staircase in the north-eastern corner and the entrance of house '4' also looked out east. South, there was probably another block of houses. The uncovered floors were disturbed by the building of a canal with a sloping from south to north. It could thus be a drainage canal, going to the Euphrates. During this period, several wells were built inside the walls, thus shared by several houses. The reason was probably to save space. According to the sondages carried out around the main excavation site, it seems that this phase of occupation did not continue further east. In compen-

sation, there are similar constructions further North toward to the Euphrates banks. The majority of coins found during the excavations came from this levels and dates from the Ayyubid period. From the most characteristic ceramics, there are a lot of samples from:

- Tell Minis and Raqqa, hard white frit ware, with a transparent glaze, colourless or cobalt blue, turquoise or purple, sometimes with lustre decoration. Two shapes predominate: a bowl roughly 20 cm in diameter and straight or slightly curved sides and a dish with flaring rim, from 30-35 cm in diameter (12th century),
- underglazed painted ware from Raqqa (13th century), painted in black under turquoise glaze on a more friable material than the *Tell Minis ware*,
- big jar with barbotine decoration stuck on the body, representing an anthropomorphic figure (12th-13th century),
- ceramic with a decoration carved into a thick white slip, coloured with yellow, green and purple under transparent glaze (13th-14th century).

IV. SEMI-SEDENTARY OCCUPATION

The most recent occupation level was suddenly destroyed by a fire. We found traces of this fire in the eastern three quarters of the excavated area. The nature of the floor is not the same in its different parts: it can be either a bare surface different from the lower layer, or a floor made of mortar or a pavement. Walls, consisting of second hand bricks, are rather scarce, which leads to the conclusion that light material was used for construction, such as wood or fabrics, as sometimes suggested by the very thick burnt layer. In square XIIIId, the soil bears peg holes which suggests that tents might have existed. The sudden destruction of this level made it possible to find such well preserved pottery left on the site:

- storage jars with pear shape and narrow base, with two handles, some horizontal, generally with sandy material,
- dish with yellow, earthenware body and turquoise glaze.

The coins, dating from the Mamluk period, tend to prove that the town lost its urban character at a moment we could place around the first large-scale Mongol invasions.

CONCLUSION

As a matter of fact, the density of construction intensified from the Abbasid to the Ayyubid period. The average area of the rooms was drastically reduced, from over 35 square meters, estimated from the Abbasid remains, to about 9 to 4 square meters during the Ayyubid period. In this period, it seems that the settlement was concentrated away from the Tell 'Alwa where the sondages II and III did not reveal any Ayyubid structure. No such small size houses are known, even in Sirāf (Whitehouse 1970, 10, Fig.4) where the plans are different too (the houses are separated with small streets, decorated on the outside with pilasters, the entrance is usually in the axis of the courtyard and there are no iwans). At Tell Tuneinir on the Ḥābūr (Fuller - Fuller 1987-1988, 286), the plan of the Ayyubid house is much simpler. It seems that the plans of Mayādīn are more in the Mesopotamian tradition of building, as in the case of

an example in Hatra (Mustapha 1983, 188 Fig. 53.). The following hypotheses can therefore be suggested:

- The Abbasid settlement spread out from Tell 'Alwa because the pottery encountered in the deeper layer of sondage III is similar to those located in the earlier levels.
- The occupation of the area was discontinuous, as shown by the quite long abandonment in the 11th century.
- Population increased strongly and rapidly in the Ayyubid period. Nonetheless the older town was not entirely reconstructed.
- The site was still inhabited after the construction of the new town of Raḥba.

Such are the stratigraphy and the first conclusions that can be drawn from the analysis of the site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bianquis 1993

Thierry Bianquis, Raḥba et les tribus arabes avant les croisades. *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 41-42, 1993, 23-53.

Fuller - Fuller 1987-1988

Michael and Neathery Fuller, Tell Tuneinir on the Khabur : Preliminary Report on Three Seasons. *Annales Archéologiques Syriennes* 38, 1987-1988, 242-290.

Honigmann - Bianquis 1994

E. Honigmann - Thierry Bianquis, Al-Raḥba. *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*. 1994, tome 8, 407-410.

Mustapha 1983

Ferial Mustapha, The Arabic House in Iraq in the Islamic Period, 14-279 Hijra. Bagdad, 1983.

Nègre 1982

Arlette Nègre, Les monnaies de Mayādīn, mission franco-syrienne de Raḥba-Mayādīn. *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 32-33, 1982, 201-252.

Northedge et al. 1988

Alastair Northedge - Andrina Bamber - Michael Roaf, Excavations at 'Āna, Qal'a Island. Warminster, 1988.

Whitehouse 1970

David Whitehouse, Excavations at Sīrāf, Third Interim Report. *Iran* 8, 1970, 1-18.

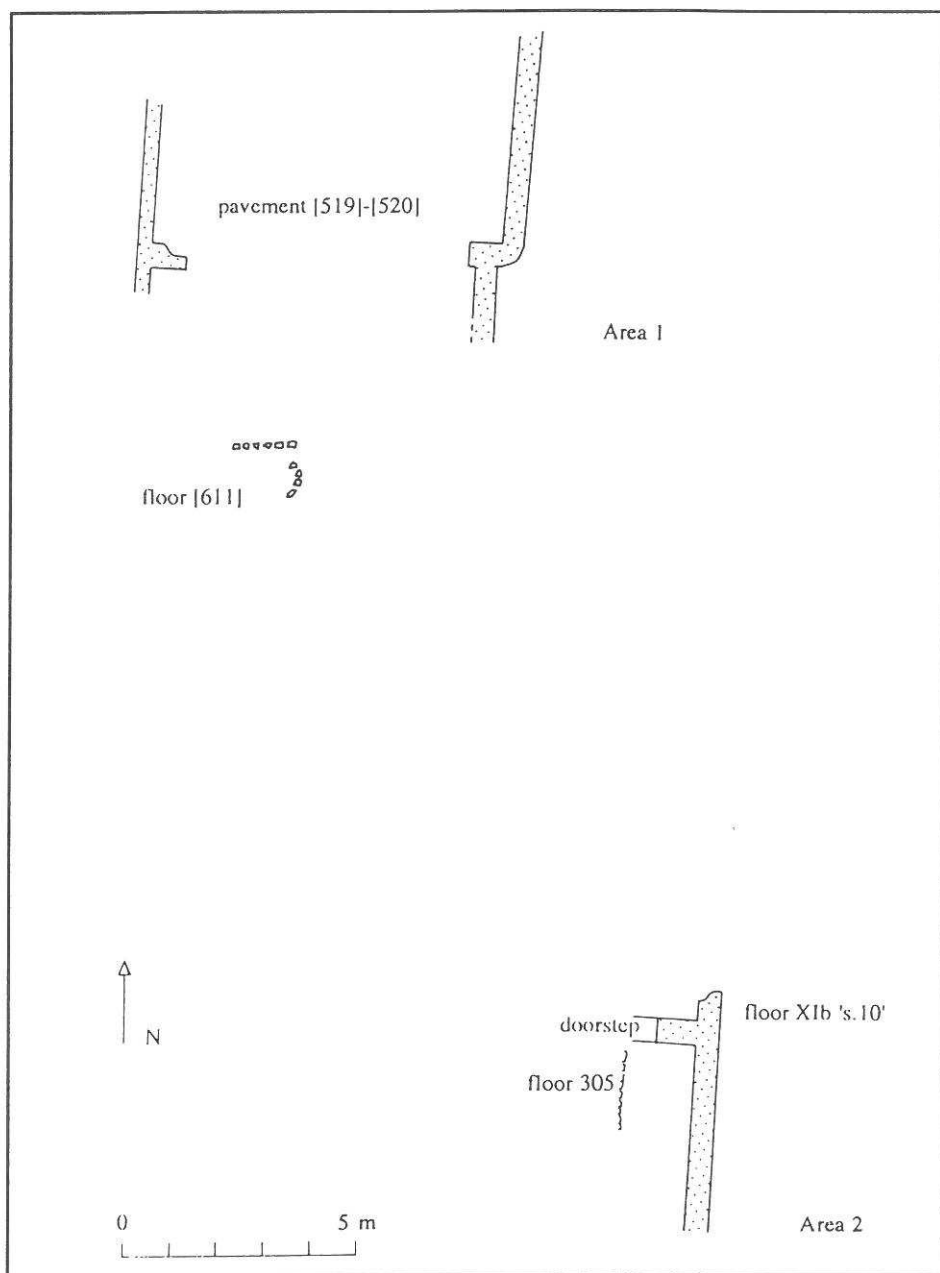


Fig. 1 Remains of the Abbasid levels

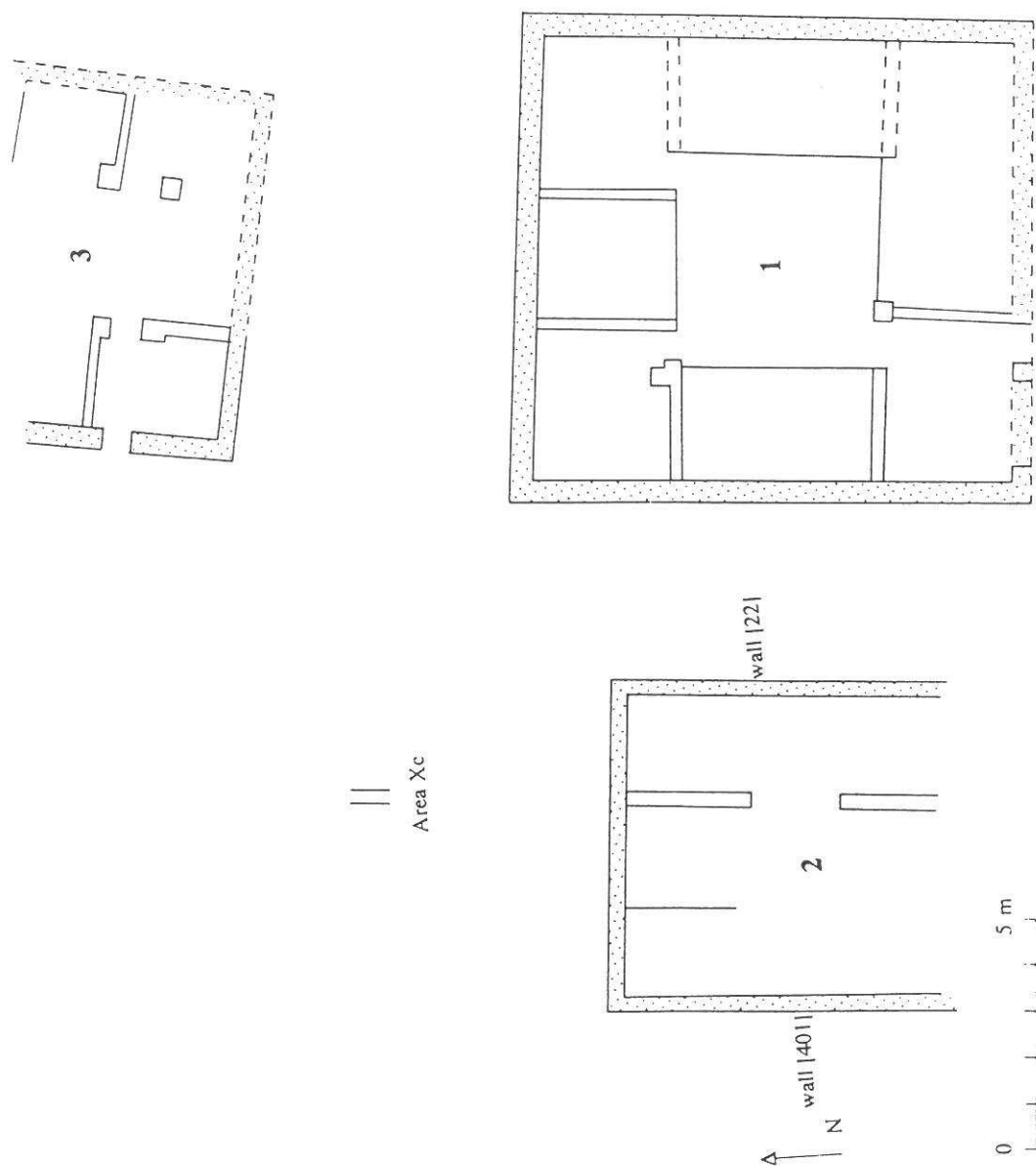


Fig. 2 Buildings of the Ayyubid phase 1

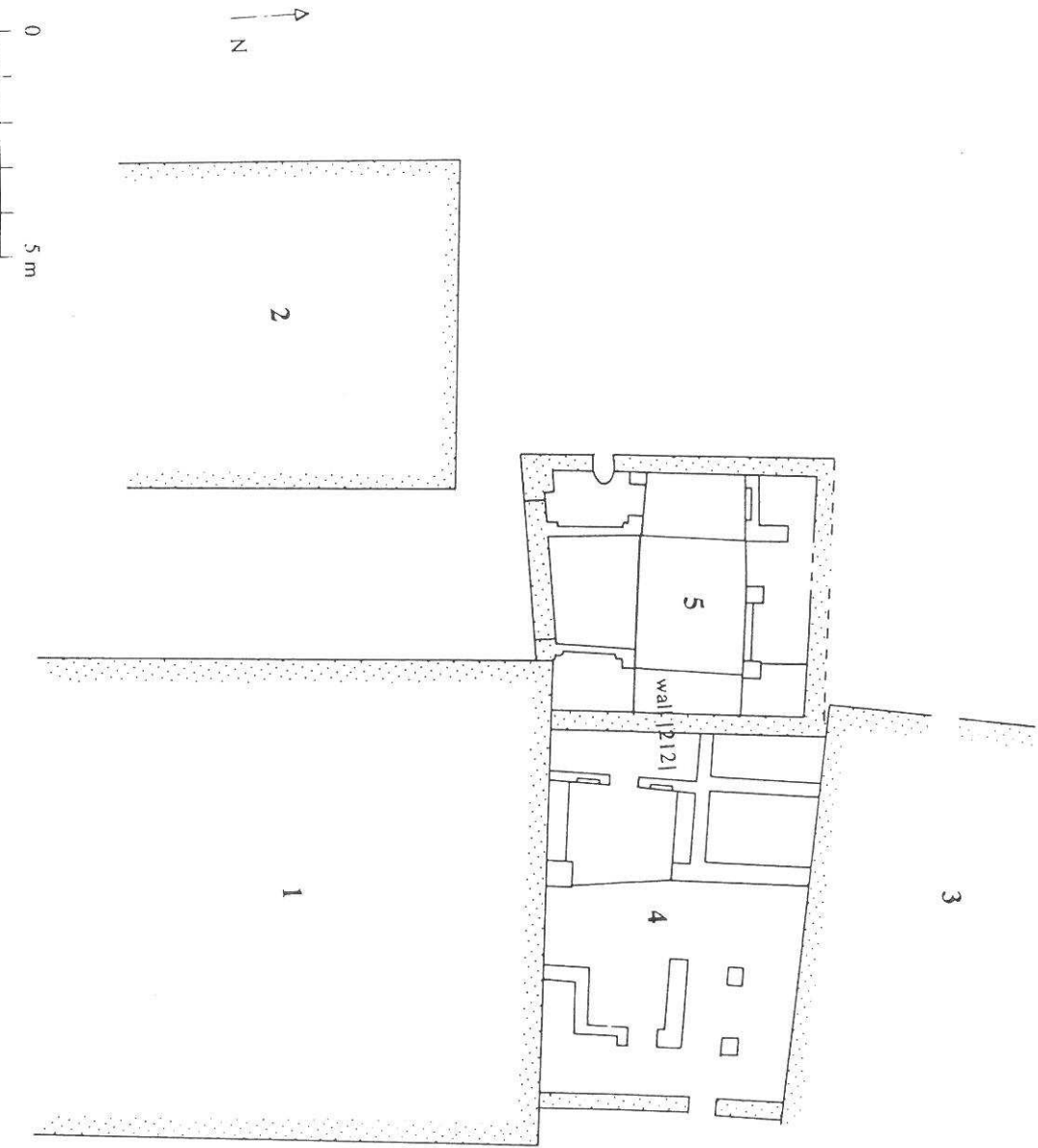


Fig. 3 Buildings of the Ayyubid phase 2

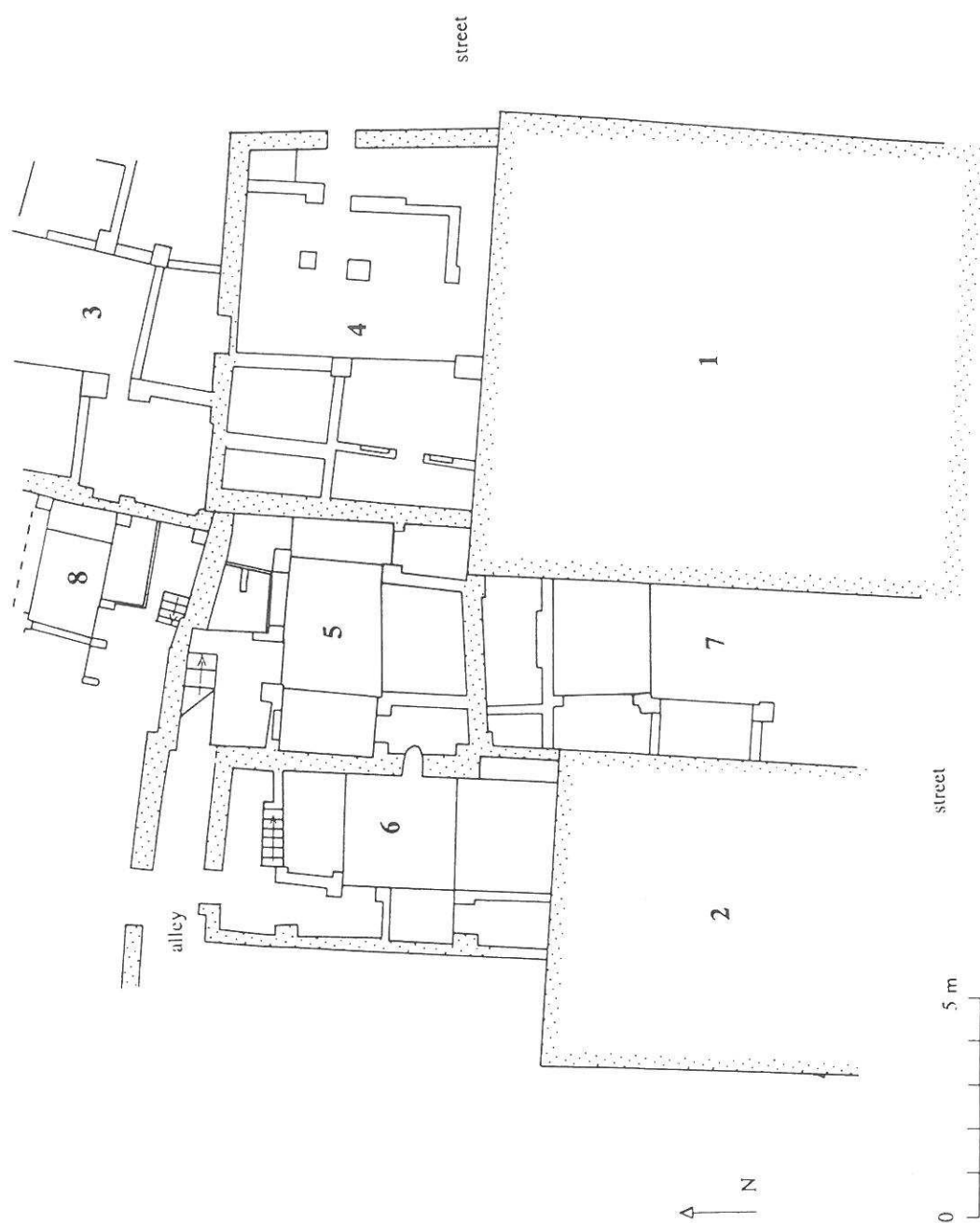


Fig. 4 Buildings and modifications of the Ayyubid phase 3

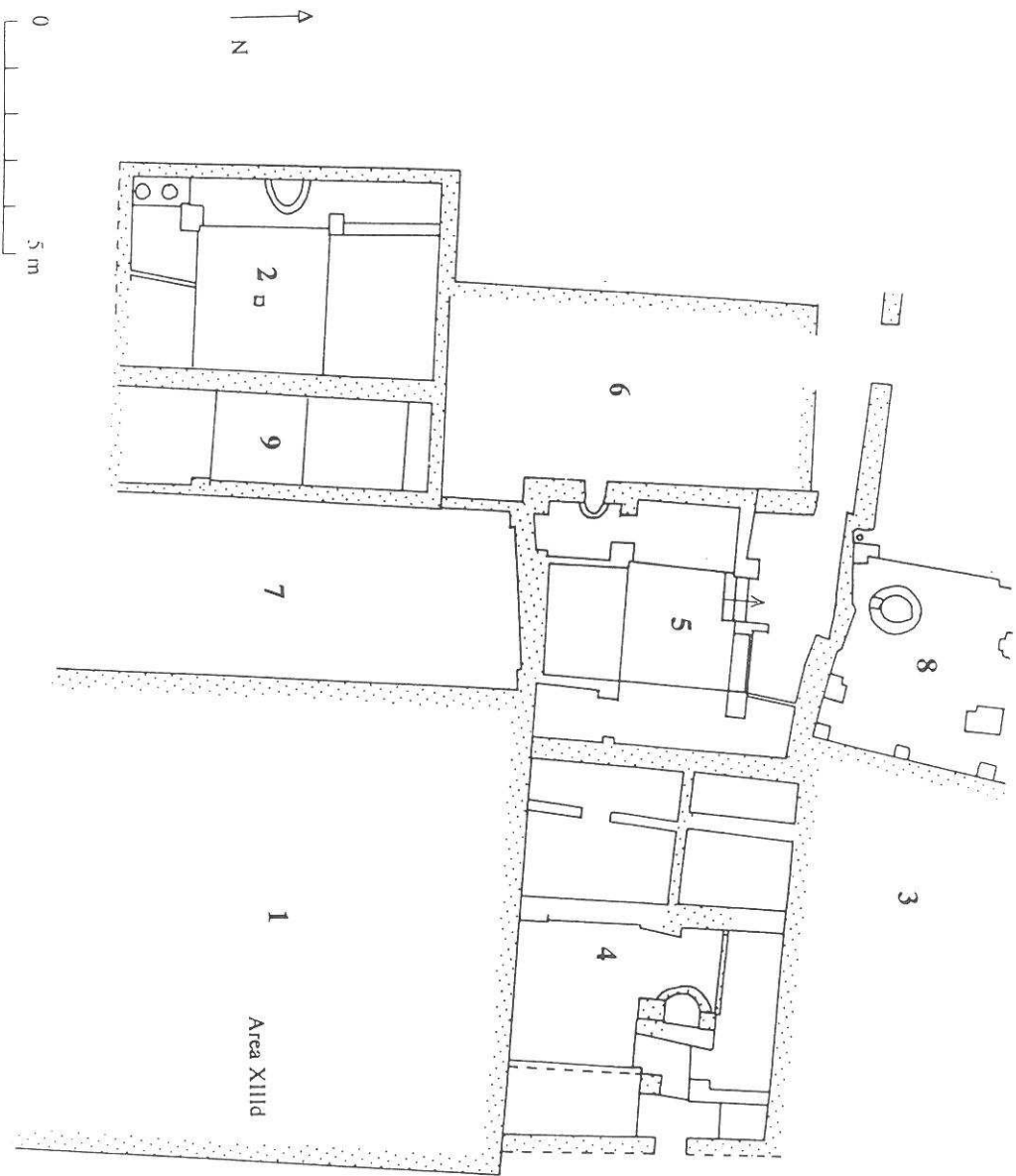


Fig. 5 Buildings and modifications of the Ayyubid phase 4